

Troop-Leading Procedures Planning Process

By Captain Brian LaMarca

Upon returning to the base camp after patrolling in western Baghdad, the company commander is directed to report immediately to the task force tactical operations center (TOC), where he is briefed that he will be executing a company raid with an attached Special Forces team at an unknown address in less than 6 hours. By the time the commander departs the TOC, he has about 5 hours to plan, coordinate, and execute this mission based on very vague intelligence.

This situation happened to me in my third month of command and—for the first time—tested the planning process I used to develop effective and expedient troop-leading procedures. As a battalion planner and company commander, I saw three approaches used to tackle the planning process:

- *Centralized planning*—dictating information down to assigning individual vehicle positions and sectors of fire.
- *Cooperative planning*—gathering the platoon leaders together and deciding, as a unit, how the company would fight.
- *Framework planning*—issuing a clear intent and the task and purpose for each element and relying on platoon-level planning to round out the plan.

Centralized Planning

Advantages

With centralized planning, the commander lays out his intent with specific instructions—down to squad and vehicle level—for items such as movement order, positions on the objective, and sectors of fire. The clarity of this method leaves very little room for platoon leaders to question or determine how they will maneuver and makes maximum use of the commander's experience in employing his assets.

Disadvantages

One of the disadvantages of centralized planning is the amount of time required for the company to develop its very detailed operation order (OPORD) and graphics. Any delay in



A Soldier updates the commander after completing a mission.



Effective planning ensured the success of any type of mission, even this route security mission in western Baghdad.

the completion of the OPORD quickly devours the time available for the platoons to conduct their troop-leading procedures. This becomes a serious concern when operating on a compressed timeline.

Another disadvantage is that the commander has the sole responsibility for providing this information, and the planning process comes to a halt if he is unable to dedicate time to completing the OPORD. In continuous operations, frequent distractions (such as enemy contact in sector) demand the commander's attention. While platoon leaders could attempt to develop their own maneuver plans—based on the commander's intent—their planning process would take much longer due to their lack of experience.

This method takes too long and takes too much flexibility from the platoons, which seriously hinders executing short-notice missions.

Cooperative Planning

Advantages

Cooperative planning consists of the commander and platoon leaders, beginning at the receipt of the mission, collectively deciding on the best way for the company to fight. This provides the benefit of many eyes looking at the same problem and coming up with a variety of plans. Since the platoon leaders are being asked to conduct higher-level planning (which can be a positive development experience for them), each plan is scrutinized for its validity.

Another advantage is that using this method often results in the platoon leaders' ownership of the mission plan immediately, as the completed OPORD has their input incorporated.

Disadvantages

The disadvantage of cooperative planning is that producing the company OPORD takes longer since it is

developed by a committee. As with centralized planning, it impacts by decreasing the time allowed for platoon troop-leading procedures. The process requires platoon leaders to be present for both company and platoon OPORD development, meaning that the platoon leaders are not available to respond to continuous operations demands encountered once company-level planning has begun.

This method proved the least effective of the three because it required so much leadership time—company and platoon—that it seriously limited the company's flexibility to work several missions at once. Just as with centralized planning, commanders can use other tools to receive platoon leader input instead of this time-consuming method.

Framework Planning

Advantages

With this planning method, the commander focuses on ensuring that the company OPORD includes a clear intent and the task and purpose for each platoon. He then relies on platoon leaders to develop major portions of their maneuver within the OPORD. The commander uses checks during the remainder of the preparation time to ensure that the intent is met. A major advantage of this method is that it enables platoon leaders to learn how to quickly and effectively plan their missions. This leads to improved overall planning—from company-level operations to daily combat patrols—because the platoon leaders learn what details must be considered for successful operations. Framework planning allows platoon leaders to provide their input, giving them a major role in the planning process.

Also, with this method, it takes less time to produce a company OPORD. The commander provides the necessary details for platoon planning and issues it to the platoon leaders for refinement. This allows platoon leaders a greater amount



Soldiers prepare a terrain model for an upcoming platoon OPORD.

of time for their troop-leading procedures and allows the commander time for additional contingency planning on any issues the company could face during execution.

Disadvantages

Framework planning, however, does initially take some time. If the platoon leaders are not accustomed to maneuver planning, the commander checks may take longer. Fortunately, this is an issue that can be dealt with through training, allowing the platoon leaders to gain the experience to make this second nature.

Key Elements of Framework Planning

One consideration when using this method is that it requires commanders to pay special attention to key elements of the troop-leading procedures, such as issuing a clear OPORD, requiring effective backbriefs, ensuring quality rehearsals, and conducting after-action reviews (AARs).

OPORD

For framework planning to work, commanders must focus specifically on a few aspects of the company OPORD. The first of these is the commander's intent. As a lieutenant, typically the intent statements received included generic key tasks, such as "reporting," "sensitive-items accountability," or "information operations." My company found that in order to make the intent useful to platoon leaders, more specific key tasks, such as "silent dismounted approach to reduce enemy reaction time" or "rapid exfiltration off the objective to reduce the mortar threat" were essential to make it clear how the commander wanted to fight.

When issuing tasks to subordinate units, using doctrinal terms proved essential in clearly conveying what missions the platoon leaders need to address. While this may require

some training for the new platoon leaders, sticking to the doctrinal terms made the planning process faster by preventing confusion.

While platoon leaders have an important role in determining their platoon's maneuver, the commander must still include important coordinating instructions, such as restricted fire lines, recognition markers, movement techniques, and any other mission-specific instructions. This helps prevent fratricide and ensures that platoon leaders keep their plans within the commander's guidelines.

Finally, the commander provides the essential maps and graphics to conduct their planning. Typically, we included a FalconView™ satellite photo with graphics and a sketch. While the platoon leaders have an important part in the planning process, the company still owes some details to ensure that platoons have everything they need to complete their planning.

Backbriefs

After issuing the OPORD, the commander must conduct checks with the platoon leaders to ensure that they are on the right track. The most helpful check for me was the platoon backbriefs, where we ensured that the company had a solid, refined plan. Prior to the backbrief, the platoon leaders will have already issued their first warning order (WARNO) and completed their OPORD planning. During the backbrief, platoons talk through the details of their actions throughout the operation and add their platoon graphics to the company sketch.

For raiding a building, they discussed details such as specific vehicle positions, combat power dedicated to clearing each floor, sectors of fire and task organization of each element, and platoon timelines. While the commander will already have an idea of how he would fight each platoon, a platoon leader may provide a slightly different outlook on how to complete the mission. The commander can use his intent, as well as his

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experience, to determine whether the platoon leader’s plan is valid. This is an excellent training opportunity, even during a deployment, for platoon leaders to understand why certain tactics are preferred in a given situation.

Additionally, the backbrief presents an opportunity for platoon leaders to propose changes to the company OPORD. This gives the commander the luxury of having more than one person find potential solutions to the same problem and leads to a more solid plan. Even if the commander denies a change, it forces him to validate the logic behind each aspect of his plan as he explains his decision to the platoon leader. With the platoon leaders hearing each other’s plans, it helps them understand everyone’s part in the execution of the mission and how their platoon’s fight must tie into the other platoons’ maneuver.

Finally, by adding each platoon’s graphics to the company sketch, it ensures that each platoon has common graphics before leaving. Our company found that a solid backbrief validates the company OPORD and prevents major issues from arising in the company rehearsals.

Rehearsals

Traditional rehearsals serve as the next check. For platoon level and below, walk-through rehearsals proved to be the most effective method. At company level, however, we found that a walk-through rehearsal often made it difficult for squad leaders to see and/or hear the plans of the other platoons’ squads. A map rehearsal for squad leaders and above allows the company commander to ensure that the squad leaders’ understanding of their squad and platoon missions parallel his own understanding. And it allows for additional input from the squad level on any improvements to specific details within the plan.

At the rehearsal, the company provides a copy of the completed sketch from the backbrief to each squad leader, and then has each squad leader explain his part in the execution of each phase. The sketch and explanations ensure that every company leader—down to squad leader level—has a common understanding of the upcoming mission. Quality platoon and company rehearsals definitely paid off in ensuring a smooth execution.

AARs

The last key element to framework planning is to conduct an AAR, which will ensure that future mission plans are conducted faster and executed smoother. Initially, I only required leaders from the platoons involved in the mission to attend; however, we learned through experience that platoons

without representatives at the AAR would repeat the mistakes that had been addressed at the previous AAR. I then required each platoon to have a representative at every company AAR, regardless of whether they participated in the mission or not. This allowed platoons to learn from each other’s mistakes and successes.

Additionally, the AAR allowed leaders at all levels to bring up details that had not been addressed prior to executing the mission. This identified—to the platoon leaders and myself—what else should be addressed in the OPORDs to prevent confusion on future missions. The company’s ability to honestly evaluate its own performance and identify areas for improvement allowed it to improve both its planning and execution on following missions.

Summary

Centralized planning ensures that the commander’s intent is met, but it presents problems when faced with a compressed timeline. Cooperative planning develops a unified plan, but requires a great amount of leader time. Framework planning provides the mission intent with a task and purpose for each element and relies on platoon-level planning, which proved to be the most effective method for this company commander and company.

When presented with the mission of conducting a raid with Special Forces in a few hours, I was able to quickly provide the OPORD to the platoon leaders. As they conducted their platoon planning, I finalized coordination with external assets and received a thorough backbrief with 4 of the 5 hours still available for rehearsals and final preparations.

This short-notice operation captured terrorists and a cache of weapons, explosives, and ammunition. It also provided intelligence that led to additional related targets, which we executed in the coming weeks. Preparing for this mission was demanding; however, framework planning provided us time to effectively plan, coordinate, and execute the mission with confidence.



Captain LaMarca’s assignments include battalion planner for the 91st Engineer Battalion and company commander for Charlie Company, 91st Engineer Battalion, and Echo Company, 1st Battalion, 8th Cavalry. In Iraq, his company executed raids, as well as constructed protective obstacles around polling centers prior to the Iraq election. Upon returning to the United States, he was deployed to New Orleans to assist with the Hurricane Katrina relief efforts.